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U. S. Department of Agriculture

HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Thursday, January 16, 1936

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "HOUSE PLANT LUCK." Information from the Bureau of Plant Industry, United States Department of Agriculture.

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As I have told you before, the man I go to for garden advice is W. R. Beattie of the Bureau of Plant Industry, the one I usually refer to as "W.R.B." He is a man who doesn't believe in luck -- at least with gardens. When he hears about some housewife who is "lucky growing plants", he always says she isn't lucky -- she's wise, that she just understands plant needs better than most people. And he says that house plants are much like animal pets -- they get along, or they don't get along, according to the care they get. And every different kind of plant or pet needs its own special treatment to be at its best.

W.R.B. says that the average home today has far from ideal conditions of temperature and humidity for plant growing. Most homes are too hot and dry for most plants. And most plants get too little sunlight. But some plants are better adapted for growing in such an environment than others. A geranium in bloom, for example, needs full sunlight and plenty of heat -- the very conditions that will burn and blister a delicate foliaged palm.

Plants grow best under conditions most like their native environment. A plant that has lived in acid soil for untold years thrives only in an acid soil. Other plants like the poinsettia, gardenia, or certain palms which are natives of the Tropics must have tropical conditions to succeed. Many times you buy a plant at the florist and take it from the moist even temperature of the greenhouse to a home where the air is dry, where cold draughts blow on it, where the temperature is high in the day and down at night, or where poisonous gas from the stove or heater is in the air. No wonder a tender plant begins to hang its head in a few days when it has to cope with such conditions.

But don't let all this discourage you about growing houseplants. You can choose plants that are best adapted for growing in homes. And then you can often make the home environment better for plants. You can connect gas stoves and oil heaters to chimneys which will carry off the burned gases that taint the air. Then, you can keep pans of water on the radiator and perhaps a tea-kettle going on the stove to give off vapor and add moisture to the air. In general, the most comfortable conditions for you and me are also the best for our plants.

Wrong soil is a common cause of failure with house plants. Often good soil is very difficult to obtain. And then, the soil that suits one kind of plant won't do for another. But if you keep a supply of good foundation soil on hand, you can add to it and make the special soil mixtures that suit the different plants. W.R.B. tells me that the best foundation soil consists of

2 parts rotted sod and one part rotted manure, aged at least 6 months, and well chopped and mixed together before using. If it contains lumps, screen it through a coarse screen. But put back the fibre you screen out.

With a supply of this foundation soil on hand, you can make up the various special soils. If you want soil for ferns or begonias, add a quantity of leaf mold or fibrous peat to make the soil spongy and able to absorb a good deal of moisture. If you want soil for geraniums, add a quantity of sharp sand for better drainage. Azalea plants need a slightly acid soil, so for them you'll add plenty of moss peat or oak-leaf mold to your foundation soil. Palms will thrive in the foundation mixture with no modifications. Most plants will do better if now and then you sprinkle a little bone meal on the soil.

W.R.B. tells me that many gardeners keep a supply of foundation soil always on hand. If possible, they keep it out of doors where it will freeze in winter and get some rain, but where it won't be leached or washed by excessive rainfall. But they keep a small supply for potting plants in an ash-can or barrel in the basement, but don't allow it to dry out completely.

By the way, greenhouses nowadays sterilize soil during the time of year when they are not using the soil. As you know, all compost contains weed seeds of some kinds and it also contains the spores of plant diseases that are likely to give trouble. One of these diseases which is called the "damping-off fungus" is especially troublesome in the seedbed and rots the little seedling plants off at the surface of the ground. You can make the soil safer for your plants and also kill off weed seeds by steaming it for a couple of hours in a pressure cooker or by baking it slightly in the oven. Green houses use large steam boilers to sterilize their soil.

Still another thing that makes for success or failure in growing house plants is watering them. Different kinds of plants require different degrees of moisture in their soil. When the air in a room is dry, the plants naturally dry out quickly. And that means the end of many a lovely plant. The umbrella plant is a house favorite that needs plenty of moisture. It will thrive if you plunge the pot in which it is growing directly in water in a jardineire or an aquarium. Palms should never dry out, but they can't stand water around the pot. Which means that they need daily watering or double-potting. You can place the pot in which it is growing inside of a larger pot and fill the space between the two pots with peat moss. By keeping both the soil in which the plant is growing and the peat moss packing slightly moistened, you can prevent this disastrous drying out even in a dry, warm home-atmosphere. Plants that are double-potted will need watering only once every 2 or 3 days. Others will need daily watering.

Another way to cut down the drying out of plants is to use glazed or enameled pots. With these you will have to take great care to provide drainage material at the bottom of each pot and also to avoid over-watering. You'll find gardeners who say that you can't grow plants successfully in enameled or glazed pots, that the plants need the air that reaches their roots through the sides of the porous clay pots. That's a mistaken idea if you look after drainage and watering.

These are the chief factors in luck with houseplants, says W.R.B. And if you like growing things indoors but have been unlucky so far, better have another try, giving your plant the right soil, the right atmosphere, and the right amount of watering.

